

VARIETY

Comcast speeding up the Internet service it offers to low-income customers after criticisms

By TALI ARBEL () Associated Press | AUGUST 4, 2015 — 10:10AM

WASHINGTON — Comcast is speeding up and expanding a discounted Internet service that was created to get more low-income people online.

Comcast created the program four years ago as a condition of government approval of its purchase of NBCUniversal. The service costs \$10 a month, a quarter of Comcast's promotional price for a slightly faster Internet speed.

But critics have said the service, called Internet Essentials, was too slow and its reach too limited.

The latest upgrade doubles the current speed to up to 10 megabits per second. That lets you watch online video but is still below the benchmark for broadband, 25 megabits, set by the Federal Communications Commission.

Internet Essentials had been limited to families of children who would qualify for the government's discounted school lunch program. Now Comcast is testing a program for low-income seniors, too.

"The increasing of the speed is a step in the right direction," said Arturo Carmona, executive director of Presente, a Latino advocacy group that had fought Comcast's failed proposal to merge with Time Warner Cable. "The real test will be in assuring that actual families will benefit from this."

In a report last year, the California Emerging Technology Fund, a non-profit that advocates for broadband adoption, said signing up for Internet Essentials was a "long and cumbersome" process that can take up to three months.

Comcast spokesman Charlie Douglas said some of the criticisms of the program are "quite old and have not been well-documented." Comcast says it's increasing the number of schools whose families are eligible for faster approval. Once a family is approved, Comcast can send a self-installation kit in three to five days.

Philadelphia-based Comcast said Tuesday that more than 500,000 households have been Internet Essentials customers. That's up from 350,000 households about a year ago. About 20 percent of eligible households have signed up.

Other changes Comcast announced Tuesday included adding a free Wi-Fi router so families can connect their smartphones and other devices to a home network and a pilot program for helping low-income seniors get Internet access in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Comcast said additional cities for testing the service for seniors will be announced in coming weeks.

The service's expansion comes as the government is also pushing programs meant to help bridge the "digital divide." According to a recent report from the Pew Research Center, 97 percent of adults living in a household with annual income of \$75,000 and higher say they use the Internet. For households making less than \$30,000 a year, that number falls to 74 percent.

The FCC wants to expand its Lifeline discounted phone program to include Internet service, while President Barack Obama last month unveiled a public-private partnership called ConnectHome, which aims to get low-income families discounted access to the Internet. The government had said ConnectHome will initially reach more than 275,000 low-income households.



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This Feb. 11, 2011 file photo shows the Comcast logo on one of the company's vehicles, in Pittsburgh.

